

Time for greater mechanization and automation



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The current crisis will also pass like many before. But we should use each crisis to learn lessons and improve our working and our lives in general. The industry should review this experience and use it as an opportunity to bring transformational changes in the way we work in future. We have to definitely reduce dependence on manual labour and bring greater mechanization of seed production operations and greater automation in seed processing and packing. There is a need to diversify production locations across the country and avoid concentration in a few states so that such emergency situations can be handled better.

CCOVID-19 is the greatest public health challenge faced by India in the last 100 years. It is a national health emergency and it is our duty to work with the government in this effort. Along with doctors, health workers, sanitation workers, police and others who are working tirelessly at the ground level, farmers also should be recognized for their contribution at a time like this. Agriculture is very important to keep the food supplies going during and after Lockdown.

Kharif is the most important season, contributing more than 60 per cent of our annual agricultural production. Many important crops like Rice, Maize, Cotton, Jowar, Bajra, Soybean, Vegetables, Fodder, etc. are grown during this season. The food security of the nation depends on the success of the Kharif. Agriculture starts with seed. Timely supply of seeds for Kharif is extremely important. About 30,000 trucks will have to carry about 6 lakh tons of seeds to the farmers in the next 45 days. Packing and transporting this is the biggest challenge.



Challenges & responses

Lock down announcement stopped all seed operations instantly throwing up two challenges. Ninety lakh packets of cotton seed to be packed and shipped in 300 trucks to Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. Farmers purchase cotton seed from mid-April to first fortnight of May. Transportation time is 10 days to reach the seed to interior markets. Since factories and the truck operations stopped it posed a threat to cotton crop in North India.

The second challenge was the harvesting and transportation of 1.3 lakh tons of Corn wet ears from fields in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to the dryers in Hyderabad. There were no labour to harvest and no trucks to transport. Even the trucks, the industry could manage were not able to cross the check points, leading to rotting of wet ears in field and in the trucks. This would have led to drastic fall in availability and quality of maize seed. Other crops like Rice, Bajra, Jowar and Fodder seeds also needed to be harvested but there was time.

The seed industry started engaging with the Joint Secretary (Seeds) at the Centre and with the Agriculture Ministries in the states. The industry narrated all their difficulties to the officials and the ministers for a few days after the lock down was announced.

The government responded very quickly. Within two days clear guidelines were issued by the Home Ministry exempting seed processing and transportation from lock down. The Agriculture Ministry of Telangana issued very detailed guidelines on March 23 which became a model for all states to follow in the next few days. The Ministry of Commerce established a control room under Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) to receive complaints of disruption of operations of essential commodities like seeds and they acted very swiftly on them.

Overall there was a tremendous effort by the government to bring situation under control quickly. The ground situation took some more time to improve. Sourcing of workers for plants and labour for harvesting was very tough since the families and villages discouraged them from

going for work. Trucks were not available because of reluctance of drivers due to fear of not getting food on the way and not sure of truck repair facilities on the highways. Sufficient passes were not available for company people to travel to factories and fields. All this took a few days to settle down.

The seed industry undertook many measures in their factories to ensure compliance with the guidelines of the government like safe operations, disinfecting and sanitizing people and premises and maintaining social distancing. The industry accepted the fact that the factories would operate at about 60 per cent capacity utilization now. Higher costs had to be factored in due to lower capacity utilization and additional safety measures like Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for all workers, medical check-ups for staff, sanitization efforts, etc.

The cotton seed movement to north received a big boost due to the timely intervention of railways who carried more than 60 per cent of cotton seeds from Tamil Nadu to Bathinda very rapidly. Similarly, Indian Post has started to carrying vegetables seeds packs and quality samples through their courier service and helped immensely at a time when private courier services closed down. We have to compliment Indian Railways and India Post for this stupendous effort.

Some companies in the industry have pooled their consignments and used common trucks to transport seeds to long distances to overcome the shortage of trucks. The retail counters have to operate unhindered to provide the last mile connectivity to farmers. Congregation of farmers at retail counters should be avoided when



markets open up suddenly.

However due to logistical constraints some parts of country may face temporary tight supply situations. This should not lead to exploitative pricing by the trade. Industry should keep control on the prices being charged to farmers.

The industry is also making efforts to be fair and pro-active in releasing funds to vendors and seed growers so that everyone will have access to cash during these difficult times. Still some more improvement has to happen at the ground level but we are moving in the right direction. Overall we can expect that the farmers will have timely access to seeds for this Kharif because of all these efforts. Seed industry is also getting ready to plant Kharif seed production in May/June in the fields of seed growers. It is a lot of work under very difficult conditions.

Additionally the members of Federation of Seed Industry of India (FSII) have come forward in a big way and contributed more than Rs 7 crore of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) money towards COVID Relief covering contribution to PM Cares, Chief Ministers' Funds and NGOs who provide PPE, food and rations.

The future

The industry should review this experience and use it as an opportunity to bring transformational changes in the way we work in future.

We have to definitely reduce dependence on manual labour and bring greater mechanization of seed production operations and greater automation in seed processing and packing. There is a need to diversify production locations across the country and avoid concentration in a few states so that such emergency situations can be handled better.

Several new digital platforms are available for conducting commercial operations like sales and distribution, for education of farmers and to track material movement. Seed industry should use them and build capacity among farmers to receive inputs, technical advice, optimize natural resource utilization on farm and to sell their produce using such platforms. Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be used in quality control operations. Use of technology will be accepted more readily now and there will be less resistance to change.

The world is looking up to biotechnology (vaccines) and science (treatments) to fight



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COVID19. Similarly, biotechnology and plant breeding research must be backed so that better solutions are made available to the farmers. The future lies in use of science and technology.

We thank and compliment several thousands of farm workers, seed industry persons and seed growers who are working in the field, braving the threat of the disease and putting up with many difficulties, to maintain seed supply for the benefit of the farmers and for the country's food security. They should be protected with COVID specific health and life insurance coverage along with financial rewards.

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